

Conquering Greece: A Persian perspective

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The Greeks' successful repulsion of the Persian invasion in 480-479 B.C. was arguably their most famous victory. But we usually discuss it only from the Greek perspective. What did the Persians think?

Persian versions

We classicists have a habit of referring to our subject as the study of 'the ancient world', as though Greeks and Romans were the only ancient cultures worthy of serious study. This is not so, and even in the field of 'classics' (narrowly defined) it is crucially important to ask how other ancient cultures perceived, and interacted with, Greeks and Romans. In order to illustrate this, I will revisit a central event in classical history, the Persian attack on mainland Greece of 480/79 B.C.

From Aeschylus and Herodotus we know a fair amount about Greek perceptions of Xerxes' campaign; but how did the Persians view it? At first glance, the question seems impossible to answer. Inscriptions set up by and for the Achaemenids – the Persian royal dynasty at the time – never so much as mention the invasion of Greece, nor does there appear to be any other evidence that we might bring to bear on the issue. If we look closer, however, we can make some progress.

Making a splash

My starting point is Xerxes' infamous bridge across the Hellespont, described in book 7 of Herodotus. We all know what it meant to Greek observers: in their eyes, the Great King overreached himself by defying the natural boundary between continents, and yoking Europe to Asia. The Persians' view of the matter has so far remained elusive. Modern scholars point out the logistical advantages of a bridge, but logistics alone is hardly the point, just as Xerxes' digging a canal through Mount Athos (also described in book 7 of Herodotus) was not *simply* a matter of ensuring a smooth passage through tricky waters. These were major publicity stunts, designed to place Xerxes in a tradition of Near-Eastern kings who prided themselves on 'opening up mountain passes'

and 'crossing the sea' (as already described in the ancient Iraqi poem *Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest literary texts to survive). Xerxes, it seems, bridged the Hellespont (and cut through Mount Athos) in a bid to take his place among them. But why did he choose the Greeks to show off his power to? And why did he announce his intentions by bridging the Hellespont? In answer to these questions we need to take a look at what Xerxes himself has to say about the Greeks. Here is an extract from the Akkadian-language version of his so-called Daiva Inscription:

King Xerxes says: By the favour of Ahuramazda, these are the countries whose king I am, apart from Persia.... Media, Elam, Arachosia, Urartu, Drangiana, Parthia, Aria, Bactria, Sogdia, Chorasmia, Babylonia, Assyria, Sattagydia, Sardis, Egypt, the Greeks who dwell in/by the Ocean (lit. 'Bitter River') and who dwell on the other side of the Ocean ('Bitter River'), Maka, Arabians, Gandara, India, Cappadocia, Dahai, Amyrgian Cimmerians, Pointed-Cap Cimmerians, Skudra, Akaufake, Libya, Caria, Ethiopia.

Like his father Darius, and like other Achaemenid kings after him, Xerxes illustrates the magnitude of his empire by listing his subject peoples. Among those peoples, the Greeks hold a prominent place: their entry is exceptionally long and is exceptional also in that it tells us something about where they live: in and around the Ocean. That is an interesting piece of information, for it suggests that Xerxes regarded the Greeks as posing a unique challenge: in order to conquer them, one had to cross the ultimate frontier, the Ocean.

To the ends of the earth

So how did Xerxes imagine the Ocean, and where did he locate it? Greek authors variously describe it as a river that encircles the world, or the open sea to the west of the Pillars of Heracles. Xerxes too regards the Ocean as a river of sorts, for he literally calls it the 'Bitter River' in Akkadian; but unlike the Greeks he clearly has the Mediterranean in mind. The idea of the Mediterranean as an Ocean may strike us as odd but makes a lot of sense from a Persian perspective: to the Persians, the Mediterranean was the Western sea *par excellence*. In fact, they knew that it was connected with the Black Sea, which meant that it surrounded Asia on two sides. They also knew that there was only the tiniest bit of land that separated the Mediterranean from the Red Sea, and that the Red Sea in turn connected to the 'Sea that comes from Persia', as Darius calls the Indian Ocean in one of his inscriptions. With some imagination, Persian geographers could therefore extrapolate a coherent body of water that encircled Asia as a whole. That, in fact, is precisely what their Mesopotamian predecessors had done in a fascinating document called the Babylonian *Mappa Mundi*.

The *Mappa Mundi* (above) is preserved on a single tablet from late Babylonia, now kept in the British Museum. Its exact provenance is unknown, as is its date of composition (ca. 600 B.C.?). The map is not meant to give anything like a realistic representation of geographical space. Rather, it pictures the contours of the world as seen from a Babylonian vantage: roughly speaking, north is at the top, south at the bottom, the two lines that cut across the central area represent the Euphrates, with Babylon the large rectangle above the centre point. Towards the bottom of the inner circle we have two other bodies of water labelled 'channel' and 'swamp', the latter evidently representing the marshes where the Euphrates issues into the Persian Gulf. At the top there is an area representing the mountains of Armenia, while on either side of the Euphrates we find a selection of familiar places in and around Mesopotamia (roughly modern Iraq). Clockwise from the top these are: Assyria, Der, Bit-Yakin, and Habban. The

circle at the bottom of the map represents the Elamite capital Susa. All that is surrounded by a double circle labelled the 'Bitter River'. There is a clear sense that the world ends at this river: beyond it, geographical space splinters into triangle-shaped regions whose main characteristic is that they are remote. Most of the labels are damaged in this area, but one of the few that survive intact indicates a place 'where the sun is not seen'. As we can see also in the *Odyssey's* description of the entrance to the underworld, places where the sun is not seen are beyond the realm of normal human experience.

We can now begin to understand how Xerxes envisaged his Greek campaign: for him, to cross the Bitter River and attack mainland Greece was to prove himself a true ruler of the world. The idea was not new. Already Darius had stressed that his empire stretched beyond the Bitter River:

Ahuramazda [the Persian top god]... gave to King Darius the kingship of this wide earth with many lands in it – Persia, Media, and the other lands of other tongues, of the mountains and the plains, of this side of the Bitter River and the far side of the Bitter River, and of this side of the Land of Thirst [i.e. the desert] and the far side of the Land of Thirst.

Here, the Bitter River appears as one obstacle among others, but elsewhere in his inscriptions Darius treats it as representative of all geographical barriers that might be a hindrance to his power. For example, he claims to have ruled over the Scythians 'from across the Bitter River' on his tomb at Naqsh-e Rostam. As far as Darius was concerned, he had indeed conquered these people (Herodotus, naturally, had a different opinion), and we now understand why it mattered so much to him: the Scythians tested his claim to rule the world on either side of the Bitter River. It is no coincidence that Darius began his Scythian campaign by bridging the Mediterranean at the Bosphorus, a place where it really does look like a river. Xerxes took his cue from his father, except that he bridged the Bitter River at the Hellespont, not the Bosphorus; and then invaded Greece rather than Scythia.

So this is one way in which the Persians made sense of their invasion of mainland Greece: they intended to impress on the world the transcendental reach of their empire. Not even those few triangular lands across the outer Ocean eluded the emperor's grasp. Greek observers understood what was at issue, though predictably enough they proceeded to distort the imperial message. Aeschylus, for example, reinterprets Xerxes' bridging of the Hellespont as an act of reckless transgression (in his tragedy *The Persians*); and Herodotus complains that

Xerxes abused the Hellespont by treating it like a 'brackish river' and a 'bitter water', clearly echoing the idea of the Mediterranean as a 'Bitter River'. These are just two examples of how the Greeks responded to Persian ideas of world conquest. There are many more, and we stand a much better chance of appreciating them once we begin to understand how the Persians thought about themselves. Studying the 'ancient world' cannot be a matter of studying the culture and society of Greeks and Romans alone – because they were in conflict, and dialogue, with many other people.

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To find out how the Persians attacked a Roman garrison see Simon James' piece in this issue.